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## Autoethnographies of Reading as an Occupation

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## Autoethnographies of Reading as an Occupation

### Abstract

*Background:* The conceptualization of reading as an occupation is an emerging area, and guides for occupational focus in reading intervention are incompletely formed. We explored our own experiences with reading and awareness of reading as a personal occupation for perspectives to inform our practice.

*Methods:* We used autoethnography to capture our five separate experiences. These experiences were analyzed collectively for themes using the lens of occupation as framed by the model of occupational adaptation.

*Results:* Across our experiences, occupational patterns, products, and meaning were identified. Themes in patterns of reading highlighted the challenges of the academic setting and the importance of time to reading activities. Products of reading were external, such as achievement and skill, and internal, such as positive and negative emotions and perceptions of limitations. The meaning of reading revolved primarily around emotional responses, how reading made the reader feel about the activity and about themselves, and the amount of effort required and for what benefit.

*Conclusions:* Our reflexive examination of reading from an occupational perspective yielded key points for development of occupational approaches to reading intervention in our personal practices.

### Comments

The authors report no potential conflicts of interest.

### Keywords

occupational therapy, reading, dyslexia

### Credentials Display

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Reading is a human activity that permeates daily life. When viewed through the lens of human activity, reading can be conceptualized as an occupation, a purposeful activity engaged in for meaning. The American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA) recognizes reading as an area of the profession's domain in *The Occupational Therapy Practice Framework* (2017) and promotes occupationally oriented strategies for intervention (AOTA, 2019a). Specific learning disorders in which reading disturbances are most prevalent are estimated to occur in 5%–15% of the population (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). The inability to quickly acquire the skill of reading can have impact throughout an individual's range of activities.

There is a rich history of interest in and inquiry into the experience of reading and reading difficulties. McDowell (2009) documented early work about children's reading habits in the 1830s. At that time, teachers wanted to know what children read and how they came to choose it. Today, personal stories, including TEDx Talks (2019), abound on the internet concerning the challenges of reading difficulties and the overcoming of those challenges. These stories quickly reveal that reading experiences are individually defined, necessitating careful and rich examination. Much of this diversity can be attributed to the heterogeneity of the origins of the condition. Specific learning disabilities have been associated with disparate etiologies in neurology and genetics (Grigorenko et al., 2020). Although experiences are divergent, formal inquiry can elicit predominant themes.

For example, the perspectives of students in higher education with reading difficulties form a topic of qualitative study (Doherty, 2015). Among divergent profiles from seven college students with dyslexia with reading difficulties, Brante (2013) detected themes of heavy investment of time and energy in reading. When comparing the experiences of college students with and without dyslexia, MacCullagh et al. (2017) found students with dyslexia engaged more intensely, frequently, and strategically, making use of self-directed adaptive techniques and using help from instructors. Looking specifically at students in health-related training, themes emerged of student confidence in revealing their reading struggles, a preference for problem-based learning approaches and positive feelings about performance in clinical communication, and team building skills. Shaw and Anderson's (2018) phenomenological explorations of the experiences of eight medical students were less positive. Themes of fear and lack of understanding and support emerged. Newlands et al. (2015) interviewed seven doctors in their first year of practice. The new professionals were reluctant to disclose their reading struggles with colleagues and reported challenges in communication, time management, and anxiety. Major and Tetley (2019) used a narrative life course approach to examine the impact of dyslexia on registered nurses' engagement in continuing education. Previous learning experiences had both positive and negative impact. The teaching approaches of those providing the continuing education lectures were crucial. These qualitative studies provide insight into the experience of reading and how they impact occupational engagement. Across the studies emergent themes relate to how reading is performed and for what purpose and meaning. They frame reading from an occupational perspective.

As a profession with a holistic approach to practice, an understanding of reading as an occupation is critical and the basis of the distinct value of occupational therapy. The role of occupational therapy in reading is under exploration, and there is an emerging interest among occupational therapy professionals in how to address reading from an occupational perspective (AOTA, 2019b; Grajo & Candler, 2016; Grajo & Gutman, 2019; Handley-More et al., 2015). Understanding how individuals occupationally engage in reading can guide in understanding the occupation itself and in effective intervention for individuals who experience reading difficulties.

In this study we questioned what our own experiences with reading could tell us about reading as an occupation. We asked first, Does examination of reading experiences through an occupational lens support the notion of reading as an occupation? Second, Would common themes emerge across our disparate experiences? And third, Do these themes tell us anything about how we should approach and design interventions for individuals with reading difficulties? Thus, the purpose of this study was to explore the concept of reading as an occupation using our own experiences with reading combined with our trained understanding of occupation to inform our practice. We captured our diverse experiences through the qualitative methodology of autoethnography (Bochner & Ellis, 2016). Our disparate autoethnographies provided the data for thematic analysis from an occupational perspective.

### Method

The project was designed from circumstances of opportunity. Four students in an occupational therapy master's program expressed interest in completing a research project concerning reading as an occupation. Once assembled, the group members, including the instructor, self-identified disparate and unique experiences with reading that collectively provided a diverse range for exploration. All of the group members held a simultaneous understanding of occupation from perspectives developed by the profession of occupational therapy. This configuration of disparate reading experiences, coexistent with training in concepts of occupation, showed potential to provide a rich exploration of reading as an occupation. The participants were inducted into the study according to approved institutional review board procedures. Differing perspectives on reading contributed by the participants included:

- growing up with dyslexia
- growing up with severe inattentive ADHD
- difficulty with reading that was not formally identified
- typical reader growing up with a sibling with dyslexia
- skilled reader with no experiences with dyslexia until entering the profession of occupational therapy

Autoethnography is a qualitative approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno) (Bochner & Ellis, 2016). Our examination of autoethnographies concerning reading difficulties suggested that this method can yield important information about reading as an occupation. Thus, for this study, we reflectively analyzed our life experience with reading to capture the essence of its impact on our occupational selves. The autoethnographies were composed independently with the support of topic-related discussion. The researchers met weekly for 12 weeks, reviewed group selected information from literature and media on reading difficulties, and reflected on their own experiences with the goal of identifying the central theme or story that encapsulated each member's personal experience with reading. Discussion was tracked using an audit trail and involved the technique of exploring the topics backward and forward, forward and backward in time and inward and outward, outward and inward from personal perspective to others' perspectives. At the same time, the researchers returned to their stories, rewriting, adapting and editing, and identifying their emerging central story theme.

The five resultant autoethnographies were shared in the group and analyzed for collective themes relevant to the perspective of reading as an occupation. The theoretical lenses for this portion of the study were the three attributes of occupation as posed by Schkade and Schultz (1992) in the model of occupational adaptation. According to the model, to be considered an occupation, an activity first must require active participation. Active participation can be observed in patterns of engagement. Second, and

more recently framed as related to personal goals (Grajo, 2019), occupations as a result of personal performance also produce a product that can be tangible or intangible. Finally, an occupation has personal meaning. Preliminary research questions for the secondary analysis were:

- What are the patterns of activity related to reading among the experiences of the researchers? What themes emerge in type of activities engaged in related to reading, where reading occurs, time spent in reading? What other attributes are identified?
- What products were gained from engagement in reading? How is mastery defined? Do themes emerge concerning pleasure and displeasure as a product? Success or failure?
- What meaning for the activity of reading emerges among the researchers? What themes emerge, convergent and divergent, concerning attitudes toward reading? Did the expectations of others have an impact on these attitudes? How did meaning shape the patterns of activity that developed?

The five autoethnographies were the data used for analysis following the procedures described by Creswell (2013). The autoethnographies were shared among the authors and analyzed for collective themes. Analysis was organized a priori under categories from the model of occupational adaptation perspectives of reading patterns, reading products, and the meaning of reading (Schkade & Schultz, 1992). As described by Creswell (2013) first each group member independently unitized the autoethnography data. To focus our lens on occupation each unit was identified as representative of reading pattern, product, or meaning. For dependability, group members met and compared units clustered among these three categories, reaching agreement on their placement in the categories. Using procedures of consensus and an audit trail of decision points, units in each of the three a priori categories of reading patterns, products, and meaning were then organized and summarized into themes. The emergent themes were finally considered using group discussion in light of their significance to our own occupational therapy practice incorporating an occupational approach to reading. Member checking was consistent, inherent in the process in that the authors of the autoethnography data sources also conducted the secondary analysis.

## Results

### Autoethnographies

Abbreviated versions of the five autoethnographies are presented as edited by the authors. The autoethnographies are presented in a sequence of intensity, from stories concerning more to fewer reading challenges, to provide the reader with a perspective of the continuum of reading experiences the collective autoethnographies portray.

#### ***Randa: Growing Up With Dyslexia***

**Reading and Writing Memories.** When I first started writing, I wrote everything backward to where you could only read it in the mirror. This was one of the first signs of my disability with reading and writing. I dreaded to read and knew deep down that I was not keeping up with the other students. These issues went on for a while. My teachers finally realized that I was lacking comprehension skills and started testing me for disabilities.

In the third grade, I hated reading and writing still. I cried every time I had to do homework or study at home and when I got chosen to read in class. When I got my STAR test results back, my teachers noticed that I was a little behind. The elementary school that I attended wanted to put me in special ed because of my lack of vocabulary but couldn't because my math results were far too high. I was humiliated when having to go through the process of testing.

In the fourth grade, I was becoming more behind. The school did extra testing and suspected ADHD. They found it could not be ADHD because of how speedy I was while answering the questions.

Next was an IQ test. My IQ came out to be 127 in the fourth grade. The physicians and specialists said that this was the indicator that I had dyslexic tendencies. They put me in the 504 program for school, and I joined the Scottish Rite program. These programs helped tremendously throughout grade school. I knew the other students saw that I needed the extra help, and I was so scared of being made fun of. Luckily, I was never bullied.

Around the sixth grade, one of our family friends found out that I had been diagnosed with dyslexic tendencies and wanted me to join a group called the Flippen Group. This program was extremely beneficial for my learning strategies. It showed me different ways to learn and compensate with my difficulties. It also consisted of showing me different ways of writing letters. The physician saw my results, came to Texas to assess me, and I did so well that he asked me to present what I had learned at a board meeting. This program involved me going straight from school to my friend's home three times a week for 2 hr. There were days I was exhausted or wanted to go spend time with friends instead of working more. As I might have had some bad days here and there, I knew if I put in the extra hours of work each day, then I could catch up with the other students. I was extremely motivated and saw a huge difference in the way I was reading. The improvement I saw was inspirational. My parents never let me give up on myself, which helped my confidence tremendously. They motivated me to be the best I could be, which was a huge factor in my learning. I stayed motivated throughout the rest of the program and soon became a high school student.

In high school and college, I took a lot of difficult classes. My sophomore year of college, I had to miss the first 2 weeks of the semester because I was diagnosed with a pulmonary embolism. While in the hospital, I still read the textbook and stayed ahead with my classes. My motivation was extremely high, at this point, to read and write as well as everyone else. I knew that I wanted to be an occupational therapist since I was in the seventh grade. I still struggled at times. I always told myself that struggle is temporary.

I am now a graduate student in occupational therapy, which has been one of my biggest accomplishments throughout my lifetime. The moral of my story is to never give up and stay motivated. If I can accomplish this and go through everything that I had to throughout my life, then anyone can.

### ***Kendall: Growing Up With Severe Inattentive Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder***

**Read Between the Lines.** “Read this out loud to the class” and “you have 10 min to look up these answers in the book before we go over them” were two of the many types of statements that I dreaded in grade school. When it came to reading, I have had difficulty with reading speed, determining what is important when reading, finding answers that are not word-for-word in a text, and remembering what I read (even if it was just a couple of sentences). I have graduated from high school and college, with a bachelor's degree, and I am currently in graduate school working on my master's degree. Despite these accomplishments, I still struggle with reading. At the least, I have to set aside double to triple the time to read something as my classmates do and, even reading as slow as I do, I still struggle to pick out important things or remember what I read. I often end up highlighting 75% or more of a page, and I rarely gain pleasure from reading.

In elementary school, we were required to get a set amount of accelerated reading points each week. It took me a while to read the book and my mom had to quiz me over information multiple times for me to remember what was necessary without looking back at the book. It wasn't that I had difficulty understanding, I simply had difficulty inputting the information into my memory. I began to realize that I wasn't reading like my peers when I was in the third or fourth grade, but it became most prominent when I was in middle school. We would split up into small groups or partners and read something to ourselves,

then do something with that information together. When we were reading, I would notice that I was almost halfway done when they were already completely done. After everyone had finished reading, we would begin to discuss it, and, most of the time, I couldn't really remember what I read. And so, I would often stay quiet until after everyone talked, or I would just agree with what they said.

As a result of my reading difficulties, I have experienced many negative emotions with reading, such as embarrassment, incompetence, decreased self-esteem, lack of confidence, like I should just give up, and many more. I've experienced most of these negative emotions when I read out loud, have to answer questions, or elaborate on information that I have read. I have also experienced these emotions when I have to read around someone who was reading something similar to me because they would read the same thing so much faster. Throughout all of these experiences, I always feel like I should simply give up because I will never be able to read on the same level of those around me. I have also experienced some difficulties with my social participation because I don't want others to see me struggle with something so simple.

Despite the struggles I have faced, I graduated with my bachelor's degree from Texas Tech University in just 3 years, and I am now less than 8 months from graduating with my master's in occupational therapy. My experiences have shown me that even someone who has made it to graduate school or who has an incredible job may have one or more aspect of learning that they struggle with. Every person is unique, every individual learns differently. I work hard, and I am determined to fulfill my dreams because I do not want to let my struggles hold me back. I want to be an advocate for and be a light for those who are struggling with daily tasks and activities. Although I must deal with some negative effects of my struggles, they have shaped me into the person I am today, and for that, I am grateful.

***Audrey: Difficulty With Reading That Was Not Formally Identified***

In middle school I rode the school bus to and from school every day. I lived on the outskirts of town, and I was the last person to be dropped off in the afternoon. The bus ride home was nearly 1 hr long. Not many kids my age lived near or around my neighborhood, so I did not have companions to socialize with during the long ride home.

At first, I tried to divert my attention to working on homework assignments. However, the bumpy country roads made it near impossible to write legibly. I then decided to occupy my time by listening to my new iPod. Yet, my limited iTunes library grew repetitive and boring by the end of the week. The following week, in English class, we started to read a new novel. The teacher assigned one chapter each night to read for homework. That day on the way home from school I started reading the homework chapter on the bus ride home. I felt like I had just started reading when the bus driver called my name. I looked up from my book to find the bus had already arrived at my house. I got off the bus feeling a little disorientated; had time really gone by so quickly just because I was reading? I decided to test my new theory the following day, and once again the contents of the novel consumed my attention until my name was called. This new discovery truly excited me. Reading was fun and entertaining and enjoyable?

As a child, learning to read was a slow and troublesome process for me and my parents. I had difficulty sounding out new and unfamiliar words. I was easily embarrassed when I did not know the word or made a mistake. Reading simple picture books took me twice as long as my peers. I was reluctant to read with people because I felt it was an unpleasant experience for them as well. Even now, in middle school, I was nervous to read aloud when called on in class. I dreaded the possibility of making a mistake or stumbling on a word that was foreign to me and being unable to sound it out.

Walking home from the bus that day, I was honestly confused. How could this same task, the one that had given me so much grief throughout the years, be so enjoyable and relaxing when done in solitude? Although, the reality of the situation was that I was not in solitude at all. I was on a noisy school bus filled with bouncing children and endless chatter.

I started checking out books from the school library and reading each day on the way home from school. I looked forward to the ride home with anticipation. Opening the book to the page I left off on the day before and beginning to read was a feeling of comfort and a source of enjoyment! I started to feel like I knew the characters and could rely on them to absorb my attention until I got off the bus. Reading was growing to be a trusted companion I could count on each day. Unlike in the school setting, reading on the bus was an occupation of pure leisure. It was no longer associated with the need to complete an assignment, the anxiety of reading aloud in front of peers, or the pressure of reading a paragraph in a timely manner. I believe the elimination of these stressors allowed me to explore reading in a more effective manner and facilitated my journey in reading as an educational occupation.

***Nancy: Typical Reader Growing Up With a Sibling With Dyslexia***

“Reading is boring, and I hate it. I don’t want to do it!” I vividly remember my brother shouting this to me as I tried to persuade him to read *Harry Potter* with me. As an avid reader, I was astonished at my brother’s dislike for reading. I could not comprehend how he could hate reading so much. Looking back at this moment with fresh eyes, I have come to understand that reading is not an easy task. For my brother, reading was especially challenging. I remember helping him with his second grade English homework and asking him what he understood from the passage he just read. He looked up at me with a blank stare and shrugged his shoulders. I asked him to read it again out loud, and this was even more difficult for him to do. He read slow and careful, skipped some words, and in my parents’ words, “read choppy.” I remember how frustrated he would get doing homework assignments that involved a lot of reading. He would often get angry, give up, and not complete his work. As a result, his grades were poor and his motivation was lacking.

My brother does not like to admit he has difficulty reading and often says he “hates reading” because it is boring and uninteresting. When he was younger he was unable to stay focused on a single task for too long, particularly those involving reading. In the fifth grade he was diagnosed with ADHD. He took medication that helped with his focus and, as a result, he was able to complete his work. Nevertheless, he still claims reading is challenging and boring and remains so.

My mother remembers the difficulty my brother had reading, especially reading out loud. She wondered why he did not pick up reading as easily as I did. I remember my mother making comparisons between my brother and I. For me, reading came easily. I did not have any problems and particularly enjoyed reading. It did not matter if it was school related or just for fun. I read all the time! Deep down these comparisons bothered me.

My brother and I are not the same. We each have different talents and skills. The fact that he had reading difficulties does not make him less competent than me. It does not define who he is or what he can accomplish. However, I believe he feels limited by what he can do based on his reading skill. I have observed him set low expectations for himself, and I have seen frustration plague him when school assignments get more reading intensive. This has impacted me tremendously because I believe he is capable of doing anything.



As an early reader, I will never truly understand the struggles my brother faces with reading. While I had a good and enjoyable experience with reading, he did not. I have come to recognize that for some reading does not come naturally, and that is okay.

***Catherine: Skilled Reader With no Experiences With Dyslexia Until Entering the Profession of Occupational Therapy***

**My Reading Story.** My reading skill is like my right hand. It is there. When I need to type a key, turn a lock, pick up my socks with my right hand, I do it. There is no thinking about it, no emotion connected to it, no effort. Reading for me is like that. It is a non-issue. It is just there.

I started first grade in 1960, and the *Dick and Jane* series were still being used to teach reading. I loved Dick and Jane. Their world was so simple and clear. And I could read the stories quickly, easily, and with pride. Outside the classroom was the playground. The playground was a scary place. There were too many children in it. They gathered in groups and talked and tussled. I sat on the curb next to the classroom door waiting for recess to end and to return to the order of desks, assignments, predictability. Reading came easily to me. In academics I could excel. I don't remember how I learned to read. I just know I did it, and English was my best subject.

I loved to read but was not enamored of textbooks. I loved fairy tales and love fantasy to this day. Nonfiction was dull. A chore. In college I got by taking notes from the lectures. Neat organized notes, careful manuscript multihued by different sharpie pen colors. In college I discovered the fantasy science fiction section in the book store. I read all 24 issues of *Tarzan*.

My children were good readers. By now, I am a practicing occupational therapist in the public schools. I know about dyslexia. But the children I work with I do not see for reading struggles. That is something that teachers address. In 1993 I entered academia as an instructor in an occupational therapy program. Now I am reading a lot! Now I am reading nonfiction, and it is not a chore because it has a direct purpose. I need to understand the material because I must teach the material. I take on doctoral level work. More meaning to my reading! Now I consume the literature to analyze it for creating studies. I rarely pick a novel at this point. Too much of my reading time is professionally related.

I have organized a research group to explore reading. There are five of us, and each has different experiences to share. Nothing. I listen to my fellow researchers, my students, speak strongly, and I have nothing. They have joined this group because they have experiences with reading difficulties. Where their stories are filled with concern, questioned self-confidence, hauntings of failure, I remember reading as my source of pride. I am not immune to the expressions emitted by my students. I have felt all these things that they have felt. I have experienced dis-confidence, failure and fear of failure, pressure, pitied attention unwanted. So, my heart resonates with their stories. But for me, those experiences have no connection with reading. Reading is a refuge.

**Analysis of the Autoethnographies: Reading Patterns, Products, Meaning**

***Reading Patterns***

Several themes emerged when the autoethnographies were probed for patterns of reading activity. These were where reading occurred, time spent in reading, the social contexts of reading, and the reading process, or how reading happened.

**Settings.** Academic settings featured strongly in the autoethnographies and were cited as a demanding context. "Read this out loud to the class" (Kendall), "assigned one chapter each night" (Audrey), "testing and constantly taken out of classes in order to do this" (Randa), and "intense reading"

(Randa) were phrases associated with the academic setting. In contrast, reading for leisure occurred in multiple settings: the library, book club, reading in a pine tree, and everywhere.

**Time Spent in Reading.** The autoethnographies suggested that reading consumes time. Time involved with reading was cited by the authors with and without reading difficulties: “I set aside double to triple the time to read something” (Kendall), “extra hours of work each day” (Randa), “I read all the time” (Nancy), and “there for the pauses in the steady schedule of my days” (Catherine).

**Social Contexts of Reading.** Reading occurred in multiple social contexts. Social contexts may be competitive, “keeping up with the other students” (Randa); supportive, “helping him with his second grade English homework” (Nancy); or absent, “done in solitude” (Audrey).

**The Process of Reading.** The challenges of readers with difficulties were clearly expressed: “learning to read was a slow and troublesome process for me” (Audrey), and appeared to be well known and easily identified by the authors. They involved “different ways to learn and compensate for my difficulties” (Randa). Issues that emerged were “difficulty with reading speed, determining what is important when reading, finding answers that are not word-for-word in a text, and remembering what I read” (Kendall). In contrast, authors without reading difficulty experience cited the ease of the task: “there is no thinking about it, no emotion connected to it, no effort. Reading for me is like that. It is a non-issue. It is just there” (Catherine).

**Reading Products.** Seven categories of products of reading were identified by the authors across the five autoethnographies.

**Academic Products.** Academic products included homework, grades, and understanding the material.

**Achievement.** The participants were selected for their involvement in occupational therapy higher education and, as such, saw academic achievement as a product of reading: “I am now a graduate student in a master’s program in Texas, which has been one of my biggest accomplishments throughout my lifetime” (Randa).

**Skill.** “I was extremely motivated and saw a huge difference in the way I was reading” (Randa) and “my reading skill is like my right hand” (Catherine).

**Emotions.** Positive and negative emotions were expressed: “I rarely gain pleasure from reading” (Kendall) and it “is boring and uninteresting” (Nancy) were countered by “my inner motivation started to rise” (Randa), “so enjoyable and relaxing” (Audrey), and “felt the excitement and enjoyment of reading like I did” (Nancy).

**Escape.** One author saw reading as a “pressure escape,” “reading as a refuge” (Catherine).

**More Struggle.** More struggle emerged as a product of reading for the authors with experience with reading difficulties: “becoming more behind” (Randa) and “I still struggle with reading” (Kendall).

**Limitations.** In addition, for the authors with reading difficulties, reading yielded limitations in other occupations: “don’t want to participate in activities that make me experience these negative emotions” (Kendall) and “he feels limited by what he can do based on his reading difficulties” (Nancy).

**Meaning of Reading.** Among the autoethnographies the meaning of reading to each of the authors was multidimensional and changed over time. In Randa’s autoethnography the meaning of reading was struggle associated with feelings of inadequacy, which she countered with themes of perseverance and triumph in the face of adversity. In Kendall’s autoethnography she also describes the meaning of reading as struggle that she has translated into an understanding that others have their own unique challenges. Kendall uses this perspective to do what she needs to reach her goals. Audrey’s autoethnography centers

on a pivotal point where she discovers that reading can mean something different than the dreaded task she had interpreted it as being before. She describes a shift in the meaning of reading to something she now seeks out for enjoyment. Nancy provides us with the distinct contrast between the meaning of reading for herself, an early and accomplished reader, versus what reading means to her brother, who experiences reading as a frustrating and limiting feature of his life. She describes feelings of helplessness and regret for the ineffectiveness of past efforts to make reading better for her brother and concludes she will never truly understand. Finally, Catherine provides us with a snapshot of a lifetime of being able to read easily. Her experiences remain positive throughout but shift in emphasis. The meaning of reading in childhood is pleasure and escape from other life challenges. As she matures into her career, reading becomes a tool for understanding and inquiry. Later in life, reading reemerges in its leisure focused form. When reviewed collectively the meaning of reading among the authors spread among three themes: emotions, self-confidence, and effort.

**Emotions.** The emotional meaning of reading can be positive, negative, or frequently a combination of both. Negative emotions were associated with reading difficulties and included dread, humiliation, frustration, anger, boredom, and nervousness. Positive emotions included excitement, fun, love to read, and enjoyable. Positive emotions occurred most strongly in the narratives of the authors without reading difficulties yet appeared in all five of the autoethnographies in the context of text that also described reading successes.

**Self-Confidence.** Reading had meaning for the authors' self-confidence. Negative self-confidence, a sense that reading would remain unachievable and not worthwhile to pursue, emerged as a meaning associated with reading: "I just wanted to give up on reading altogether" and "I had to continuously tell myself that I am worth it" (Randa). Self-confidence was a factor when reading ability was compared with others: "I was reluctant to read with people because I felt it was an unpleasant experience for them as well" (Audrey). Among the narratives with mastery or ease of demand self-confidence improved: "I could read the stories, quickly, easily, and with pride" (Catherine) and "unlike in the school setting, reading on the bus was an occupation of pure leisure" (Audrey).

**Effort.** The meaning of reading was also reflected in statements of effort. For the authors with experience with reading difficulties, reading meant working harder and a call for perseverance. This perseverance was facilitated by purpose: "reading was not a chore because it had a direct purpose" (Catherine) and "I work hard to fulfill my dreams" (Kendall).

### Discussion

In this study we explored our own experiences with reading. The autoethnographies yielded personal stories that encapsulated these experiences from different perspectives across the range of reading skill, from intense to nonexistent reading difficulties. These stories were collectively examined from the perspective of occupation. According to Schkade and Schultz (1992), an activity becomes an occupation when three characteristics are present: a pattern of active engagement in the activity, a product of the activity that can be internal or external, and personal meaning. In answer to our first research question, these characteristics were easily identified across the autoethnographies and support the concept of reading as a significant human occupation.

In answer to our second question, consistent themes did emerge across our disparate experiences. Several of these themes were identified in other qualitative studies concerning the experiences of students of higher education with dyslexia. As identified by Brante (2013) and MacCullagh et al. (2017), time and extra intensity of effort were identifiable themes associated with reading difficulties and absent in the

accounts of proficient readers. As found by Shaw and Anderson (2018) and Major and Tetley (2019), emotional struggles accompanied challenges in reading. These were softened with time, yet remained sharp in memory. The continuing challenges of reading difficulties in professional life as reported by Newlands et al. (2015) are daunting, yet it is important to recognize that dyslexia is a lifelong condition requiring accommodation and adaptation.

Our final aim was to consider what the results of our inquiry into our own experiences with reading could tell us about our own occupational therapy practices. What implications does this information provide for us as occupational therapists when addressing this occupation? We concluded these themes had relevance to occupational therapy practice and pedagogy in occupational therapy education.

## **Implications for Occupational Therapy Practice and Education**

### ***Reading Patterns***

In relation to reading patterns, we concluded that as occupational therapists and educators we need to be aware that the academic setting is perceived as very challenging and is likely the setting where occupational adaptation in relationship to reading is stressed the most. However, leisure reading occurs in very different ways and places, and the emergence of leisure reading appears to signal mastery and successful adaptation.

Reading takes up time, and time was a strong theme in the autoethnographies of the struggling readers. When addressing the occupational needs of the struggling reader we felt we, as occupational therapists, need to be aware of the time demands with which these individuals may be dealing. In addition, social contexts around reading can be critical and need to be assessed. They may be competitive and bring additional stress to struggling readers. In contrast, they may be supportive, and family plays a strong role, or social contexts may not need to be present at all for reading success when reading itself becomes the social context.

Finally, in relationship to reading patterns the autoethnographies revealed to us that struggling readers are aware of the nature of their struggles. It is not necessary and may be counterproductive to point out a struggling reader's challenges. Probing the reader's own perspective of their experiences and needs may be a more fruitful approach.

### ***Reading Products***

Among the autoethnographies, the tangible products of reading, academics, achievement, and skill occur over time and are long range. Keeping an eye on the distant goal was an adaptive strategy that appeared in the stories. However, the internal and intangible products of emotion, escape, struggle, and limitations are more immediate and in the present. Therefore, we feel it is important to recognize that these immediate products of reading may be a stronger reinforcement of reading behavior and may be the more pertinent areas to address when intervening from an occupational perspective.

### ***Meaning of Reading***

The immediate products of reading featured highly in our expressions of meaning in the autoethnographies. From this we felt three questions can be elicited from the analysis to probe for the meaning of reading as an occupation in practice: How does reading make me feel? How does reading make me feel about myself? And how much effort must I expend and for what purpose? These questions can be used to seek insight on what reading means to an individual when designing an occupational approach.

## Limitations and Future Research

This small study provides a modest contribution to the study of reading as an occupation. Although personal perspectives of reading are well documented, intentional analysis of reading from an occupational perspective is novel at this time. The intent of the researchers was to explore their own experiences for application to practice. A more comprehensive look from the perspective of occupational theories is warranted.

## Summary

Further knowledge of reading as an occupation can bring deeper understanding of the activity as an occupation rather than a skill. Information concerning how individuals occupationally engage in reading can guide in effective intervention for those who experience reading difficulties. In this study, five researchers with differing experiences with reading difficulty examined our personal experiences through the method of autoethnography. When studied collectively our autoethnographies revealed identifiable themes of patterns, products, and meaning that confirmed the occupational nature of the activity of reading. This occupational perspective produced implications for our occupational therapy practice. When interacting with individuals who experience reading difficulty, we, as occupational therapists, need to be aware of the high challenges of academic settings and the time investment required for adaptive responses. The products of reading, which can be positive or negative, are critical to the meaning of reading, thus an individual's perception of the gain achieved when reading should be considered. Struggling readers experience immediate negative products and accepting these in order to achieve long range products or goals can be a successful yet costly strategy. The meaning of reading ultimately rests on how the reader feels during the activity, how the reader feels about themselves in relationship to their reading abilities, and what level of effort is required for what benefit.

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